

## Michael McRobbie: Moment of reckoning shows need to invest in education

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By: Michael McRobbie

Six months after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, increasing evidence suggests that minorities and individuals of lower socioeconomic status are shouldering a disproportionate share of the economic and public health burden caused by the virus.

Many members of these groups perform important jobs in construction, hospitality, food service and transit. Theirs is a choice—though too often the choice is made for them—between staying home and forgoing a paycheck, or showing up to work and risking exposure to the virus.

Protecting these vulnerable workers should be a major concern for policymakers and companies as we continue to confront the pandemic.

We also need to help more of these workers take advantage of advanced educational opportunities, which can lead to improved financial well-being and greater workplace flexibility and security.

When the nation reached peak unemployment in April, the unemployment rate for those with at least a four-year college degree was 8.5%, while those without a college degree faced a nearly 20% unemployment rate.

Pre-pandemic, Indiana Department of Workforce Development data indicated that 80% of in-demand jobs over the next decade would require some level of college. This number will likely rise as businesses accelerate adoption of new automation and artificial intelligence strategies to avoid future disruptions.

This is leading states to a real moment of reckoning. COVID-19 has provided a glimpse of a future that will likely include even more remote work and fewer jobs for those without an advanced education.

In the mid-2000s, Indiana leaders prudently realized the need to diversify a manufacturing-intensive economy. They focused on strategic initiatives that spurred growth in the state's now-robust biosciences and logistics sectors. Indiana's leading research universities spearheaded many of these efforts, which helped Indiana emerge from the 2009 recession stronger than most of its neighboring states.

Weathering another downturn will again depend on our strategic investments. In Indiana, it will require more focus on reducing educational attainment gaps, which is not to say that every student needs a college degree to be successful. Indeed, Indiana's recent focus on career and technical education has helped many Hoosiers start successful careers. But COVID-19 has

altered our economy to increase the demand for college-educated workers. Competition between states for jobs will intensify along these lines, and those that prioritize investments in their universities will likely find themselves at the front of the pack.

But universities also have a civic duty to rethink how they serve the regions we impact. At IU, this has led to a new Center for Rural Engagement, which is mobilizing IU resources, including our students, to address the challenges facing rural communities across southern Indiana and support partners working to improve quality-of-life factors that attract college graduates and new employers alike.

Furthermore, universities have a moral obligation to their students—and to top employers—to design programs that better prepare students for a changing work environment and build a better skilled-worker pipeline between universities and state employers.

Ultimately, as states decide where to invest limited resources, colleges and universities must recognize that, with new investment comes greater accountability to taxpayers. We must deliver a positive return to our states that reduces the burdens on our most vulnerable community members and helps propel the state economy for all Hoosiers.

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McRobbie is president of Indiana University.